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“RENEWING THE UNITED STATES’ COMMITMENT TO ADDRESSING
THE ROOT CAUSES OF MIGRATION FROM CENTRAL AMERICA”**

Introduction

Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Green, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) on the root causes of irregular migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. This is a top priority for USAID, and we are grateful for this Committee’s ongoing, bipartisan support for our work in the region.

At the direction of President Biden and in support of his February 2nd Executive Order on migration, USAID is aggressively ramping up programs to address the economic, security, and governance challenges that drive irregular migration from Central America to the United States so that individuals are not forced to make the dangerous journey north.

There is no doubt that the conditions on the ground are difficult, and COVID-19 coupled with the damage wrought by Hurricanes Eta and Iota have only served to further complicate the situation. According to the Famine Early Warning Systems Network, food insecurity in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras continues to increase because of economic shocks and recent natural disasters. Since 2017, the number of people in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras who suffer from acute food insecurity has increased from approximately 1 million to more than 5 million. While many are going hungry across all three countries, there are more than four million people suffering from acute food insecurity in Guatemala and Honduras alone.

To help mitigate the impact of recurrent drought, severe food insecurity, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in the region, on April 6th, USAID deployed a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) to respond to urgent humanitarian needs in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. The DART comprises disaster experts from USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, who are focused on rapidly scaling up emergency food assistance, programs to help people earn an income, protection for the most vulnerable, and other critical humanitarian programs. This team will be assessing humanitarian needs, coordinating with partners and local officials, and providing urgently needed aid to crisis-affected families and communities.

Targeting Efforts to Address Root Causes

Irregular migration is the result of a number of interrelated factors -- including a lack of economic opportunity, insecurity, corruption, governance challenges, and the impact of climate change.

USAID is targeting our efforts to address these root causes of irregular migration. Specifically, we use data to identify migration hotspots, so that we can scale up and focus programs most directly on would-be migrants from vulnerable places and help returned migrants reintegrate into their communities.

USAID has compiled migration information from multiple sources, most importantly U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and Vanderbilt University's Latin American Public Opinion Project, as well as host countries. By triangulating data, we have improved our ability to plan strategically and adjust programs as needed. The data we collect has enabled USAID to target the following key populations shown to have migrated in greater numbers in recent years: in Guatemala, youth, indigenous communities, and women primarily from the predominantly indigenous Western Highlands region; in Honduras, youth ages 10-29 from violent, urban areas and rural areas facing high rates of poverty and food insecurity; and in El Salvador, individuals under 40 years old earning less than \$400 per month, who are at risk of dropping out of school, or who are likely to be subjected to violence.

Strengthening Economic Opportunity, Security, Governance, and Building Resilience in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras

Economic Opportunity

Most of those who attempt to migrate irregularly to the United States from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras do so in search of new or better jobs and increased incomes to provide for themselves and their families. To support stronger, safer, and more prosperous societies in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, USAID is broadening economic opportunities, especially for young people, who are most at risk of migrating.

USAID's economic growth programs are expanding business, employment, and educational opportunities to the poor and those most likely to migrate, both in urban and rural areas. We know that opening doors to employment and education for citizens in their home countries will lead to safer, more prosperous societies.

For example, in February in Guatemala, USAID, as part of the U.S. government's Feed the Future Initiative, inaugurated a new agricultural training and innovation center in Huehuetenango, an area of high out-migration. This new center will assist more than 20,000 small farmers improve their productivity and product quality and increase incomes through adoption of state-of-the-art agricultural practices and technologies. In El Salvador, USAID provides grants and assistance to small and medium-sized businesses, spurring job creation for likely migrants, including vulnerable and displaced youth. And in Honduras, USAID is

providing skills training to youth at risk of migrating and returnees to increase their earning potential, making them more economically resilient, and less likely to migrate or re-migrate.

Partnering with the private sector is also essential to bolstering economic security in the region. USAID works with local and multinational companies in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to capitalize on their know-how, resources, and expertise to accelerate job creation. Our partnerships with companies such as Starbucks, Walmart, Microsoft, and Tigo, have helped mobilize private investment, expand opportunities, and create jobs. Recently, USAID leveraged more than \$85 million from the private sector and other organizations in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to support vocational training, education, and employment opportunities for at-risk youth, and increased food security and incomes for vulnerable communities.

Security

While fostering improved economic opportunities in the region is key, these efforts will not be successful if security challenges in the region are not addressed. The countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are among the most violent in the world, and their citizens are frequently the target of crime, and violence, and exploitation from criminal groups and gangs. USAID is addressing security challenges at the national, community, and family levels to reach those most at risk of being victimized or committing crime and violence.

Per President Biden's February 2nd Executive Order, we are particularly focused on addressing rampant gender-based violence (GBV) in the region. In a USAID 2020 Gender Analysis conducted in Honduras, women were nearly twice as likely to cite violence as a reason for migrating, indicating that GBV is a particular driver for migration among women.

We are creating and expanding primary and secondary school-based GBV prevention programming; enhancing the capacity of police, judicial systems, and child protection systems to identify, investigate, and prosecute cases of GBV; and creating and expanding locally available medical, mental health, legal services, and shelters for GBV survivors in rural and urban areas.

In Guatemala we recently inaugurated two new government centers that co-locate several government institutions to provide around the clock services to female and child victims of violence and exploitation.

In Honduras, USAID addresses GBV through education programs in schools and youth outreach centers, strengthening the institutional capacity of civil society organizations working to reduce GBV, improving the efficiency of services and referrals to public health clinics, providing family counseling, promoting economic opportunities for vulnerable groups, improving access to quality and equitable justice services, and providing anti-GBV training geared towards men.

And in El Salvador, USAID provided assistance for the establishment of 52 victim assistance centers operating at justice institutions with staff trained to provide legal and psychosocial services to victims, including victims of GBV. USAID also supported a specialized training program for judges related to GBV crimes.

Through our Central America Regional Security Initiative, USAID supports community-based approaches to crime and violence prevention, as well as rule of law programs. This includes helping youth escape the influence of gangs by establishing outreach centers and reclaiming public spaces for local communities.

We also are providing families and young people the chance to improve their lives through counseling on conflict management and by building trust between residents and the justice system. In Guatemala, we are working with the government to increase the investigation and prosecution of smugglers. USAID supported the Government of Guatemala in establishing a Specialized Prosecutor's Office Against the Illicit Smuggling of Migrants within the Public Ministry. We are now increasing our support to the unit enabling it to adopt the latest investigation, prosecution, and case management models to effectively dismantle the smuggling networks that prey upon potential migrants.

USAID's community-based crime and violence prevention programs are done in conjunction with complementary law enforcement programs supported by the Department of State.

These interventions have been very successful. In Honduras, from 2015-2020, neighborhoods with integrated CARSI programs experienced a 70 percent reduction in homicides that included some of Honduras's most violent communities -- a 20 percent greater reduction than the national average.

Governance

Transparent, accountable governance is essential, and the citizens of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras deserve nothing less.

That's why USAID works with civil society organizations in the region to increase transparency, build respect for human rights, and promote accountability. Specifically, we empower civil society organizations to advocate for reforms and exercise greater oversight over governments. We also work with central and municipal governments and support community groups to improve transparency and accountability and to expand services to citizens, with a particular focus on traditionally marginalized, migration-prone populations.

In Guatemala, for example, until recently, justice services did not reach a significant number of municipalities. USAID supported the Public Ministry in its commitment to expand services to new municipalities. With USAID support, on April 9, 2021 the Public Ministry inaugurated 68 municipal prosecutor's offices, expanding services from 16 percent nationwide coverage in 2018 to 100 percent coverage in 2021. This is an important milestone in addressing Guatemala's high incidence of impunity and extending access to justice for all Guatemalans.

In Honduras, USAID supports the National Anti-corruption Council (CNA), which has trained more than 600 public officials and nearly 300 civil society actors on transparency and the fight against corruption, including public procurement best practices. CNA has also presented twelve reports to date in its Corruption in the Times of COVID-19 series. These reports have identified alleged acts of corruption involving approximately \$68 million in purchases of medical equipment, including personal protective equipment and ventilators, low-quality materials to improve hospitals' infrastructure, and the highly controversial purchase of seven mobile

hospitals. Most recently, USAID reached nearly 84,000 Hondurans through a three-day anti-corruption social media campaign developed by the National Anti-Corruption Council.

Climate Change and Building Resilience

In Central America, climate change has contributed to more severe droughts, stronger and more frequent hurricanes, and reduced water availability. Without predictable harvests that can provide stable sources of income, many rural Central Americans are driven away from their home communities so that they can feed their families. USAID is committed to helping the governments and people of the region adapt to the effects of climate change and build resilience to future environmental shocks.

For example, in Guatemala and Honduras, USAID is promoting innovative practices and technologies that help farmers maintain and increase sustained yields throughout the year. This includes providing technical assistance to farmers to introduce drought resistant varieties and take measures to promote water conservation and better irrigation practices. These interventions are helping improve livelihoods, increase food security and help deter migration. In Honduras, USAID agriculture investments have provided agriculture and nutrition assistance to 251,000 people, and these beneficiaries have reported that their intention to migrate was 78 percent lower than the country overall. In Guatemala, USAID's climate change investments are also helping spur economic growth while combating deforestation, Guatemala's largest driver of greenhouse gas emissions. Since 2013, USAID-supported community concessions have created more than 20,000 permanent and seasonal jobs and boast a net-zero deforestation rate - demonstrating that people who make their living from the forest have a strong incentive to protect it.

Moving Forward: Challenges and Opportunities

As I have worked in several USAID Missions across the region, including serving as the former Mission Director in El Salvador, I have seen firsthand the profound human impact of our programming.

While we are proud of our accomplishments, we also recognize that more needs to be done to ensure individuals have opportunities to build a better future in their home countries.

As USAID aggressively scales up efforts to address the root causes of migration, we also recognize that assistance alone will not be enough. USAID's success in the region depends on a long-term commitment by governments, the private sector and civil society organizations to combat corruption and improve governance. We seek to work with leaders committed to the rule of law. In particular, civil society leaders play a fundamental role in ensuring that citizens are holding governments accountable.

As we advance these efforts, USAID looks forward to working with Congress on a bipartisan basis. We know that our programs must remain agile. We will continue to monitor and evaluate our work and adjust accordingly -- to scale up what is working, and to learn from, modify or terminate approaches that are not working.

Conclusion

Addressing the root causes of migration can be a win-win for the United States and the people of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. As Vice President Harris said, “The work is not easy, but it is important. It is work that we demand — and the people of our countries need — to help stem the tide that we have seen.”

USAID is redoubling our efforts in the region to meet this critical moment and help make communities in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras strong, safe, and more prosperous so that citizens can remain and work for a better future for themselves and their families.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.